



Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
National Beyond Translation Forum
“EPA and the Hispanic Community: Protecting our Health and the Environment
At the Places Where We Live, Work, Learn, and Play”
October 26, 2009

Good morning. Buenos días.

Thank you for that kind introduction, Administrator Jackson. I would like to thank you for inviting me to be a part of the EPA’s Second National Beyond Translation forum. It is an honor for me to be here, not only as a Member of Congress, but also as a proud member of the Hispanic community. I applaud you for the leadership and commitment you have shown toward protecting the environment and the health of the American people. I would also like to congratulate you on becoming the first African-American Administrator of the EPA. Your appointment is one of a number of recent firsts for our government and is a sign of the strength of our great nation.

I would also like to commend you and the EPA for organizing this forum and for your genuine interest in addressing the environmental concerns of the Hispanic community. As many of us know, Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of the United States and now constitute approximately 15% of our nation’s population. With increasing frequency, Hispanics are playing important roles at the highest levels of our government—from cabinet secretaries Ken Salazar at

Interior and Hilda Solis at Labor, to the first Hispanic on the Supreme Court, Sonia Sotomayor. Within the larger Federal workforce, Hispanics continue to be underrepresented, including at the EPA. I am encouraged by the initiative undertaken by the EPA to enhance the Agency's recruitment of Hispanics and look forward to seeing positive results from this effort.

At the state and local level, many of you in this room are leaders in your communities—owning businesses, running non-profits, serving on boards and commissions, and organizing residents to make your neighborhoods a better place to live. Today's forum demonstrates the EPA's recognition of the important role Hispanic leaders like you play in the protection of our environment and the health and well-being of our community. In the past, the EPA has shown leadership in working with Hispanic communities on critical environmental issues. One example is the EPA's U.S.-Mexico Border Water Infrastructure Program, which provides funding to communities along the southwest border to develop the infrastructure necessary to provide safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. On the Island of Puerto Rico, which I represent, my nearly 4 million constituents are able to breathe cleaner air, drink purer water, and enjoy healthier tropical surroundings in large measure due to the hard work of the EPA.

While great progress has been made over the past decades to strengthen environmental protection in Puerto Rico, we still face numerous challenges. As many of you know, on early Friday morning, several fuel tanks owned by the Caribbean Petroleum Corporation, located in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, exploded, leaving a massive cloud of smoke over the Island. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the EPA for their fast response and for taking the lead in monitoring air and water quality on the Island over the past four days. The EPA and local

officials are still assessing the environmental impact of this explosion, and I look forward to working with the Agency and Governor Fortuño to mitigate the environmental damage and maintain healthy air and water quality levels for the residents of Puerto Rico.

The explosion in Bayamón represents just one example of the EPA's impact on the lives of the American people. From breathing clean air and drinking clean water to enjoying our nation's natural beauty, each of us relies on the EPA's work every day. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which Congress passed in February, addressed the most pressing environmental needs of our nation by providing an infusion of money for water infrastructure and cleanup projects. In July, the EPA awarded nearly \$72 million to Puerto Rico to finance overdue improvements to wastewater and drinking systems and to conduct water quality planning. More recently, the EPA awarded over \$1 million to Puerto Rico to assess and clean up underground petroleum storage tank leaks.

These allocations are vital to the projects that are directly benefitted. But this funding also plays a key role in fostering greater economic development on the Island by creating green jobs and increasing conservation efforts.

Very briefly, I want to touch upon two projects in Puerto Rico where the EPA is providing much-needed support. First, the EPA has partnered with key stakeholders along the San Juan Bay Estuary to protect and restore this critical estuary in the Island's capital city. Recently, I co-sponsored a Resolution to increase awareness of the importance of healthy estuaries by designating September 26, 2009 as National Estuaries Day. On that day, I visited the San Juan Bay Estuary and was impressed by the great work that has been done thus far. Healthy estuaries

are not only beautiful to see but play a vital role in the ecosystem by providing habitats for a large number of living organisms.

A second area where the EPA and Puerto Rico are working together concerns the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques, which on the Big Island we commonly refer to as “la Isla Nena.” Vieques was formerly used by the US Navy as a bombing range and weapons testing ground, and is currently one of 14 sites in Puerto Rico listed on the National Priorities List for cleanup under the Superfund program. Since the Navy’s departure from Vieques in 2003, the EPA has developed a comprehensive process to clean up the areas impacted by decades of naval training operations. These efforts are ongoing. I also have called upon officials of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to assess the environmental health hazards to which the residents of Vieques have been exposed. For too long, Vieques’ residents have experienced higher rates of disease compared to residents on the Big Island. It is time that we address these residents’ concerns over the impact such contamination has had on their health.

While EPA funds have contributed to sustainable development efforts and environmental protection throughout the islands of Puerto Rico, federal funding is not the sole solution to address these challenges. An essential component of this effort lies in the hands of the people. It lies in your hands and in the hands of our Puerto Rican and Hispanic communities across the nation.

Together, we have to increase environmental awareness so that our fellow Hispanics will make educated decisions about their health and about how they interact with the environment. Environmental education provides our communities with the best tool to better understand the

consequences of our behaviors—at home, at work, and at school—and the repercussions of these actions on the overall environment.

This brings me to the final issue that I would like to address today: the importance of environmental education to our children's future. As I am sure you are aware, the United States lags behind most other industrial nations in students' math and science achievement. We cannot be satisfied by these statistics but must actively seek to change them. In Congress, I am co-sponsoring legislation that would authorize two programs to enhance environmental literacy by providing funding to support environmental educational programs.

But, to solve this problem, our nation will need more than government programs. We will need the efforts of committed people like you across our nation. I hope that each of you also feels a sense of responsibility to help someone young in your community develop an interest in science and the environment. Each of you is a role model to the Hispanic youth in your communities. They look up to you and see not just a successful businessperson, scientist, professor, or community leader, but a successful Hispanic businessperson, scientist, professor, or community leader. They can relate to your upbringing and to your struggles. And, by seeing where you are today, they can also envision their own successes tomorrow. I urge you to get involved and make a difference for the young people in our communities. As former President Jimmy Carter once said: "It is good to realize that if love and peace can prevail on earth, and if we can teach our children to honor nature's gifts, the joys and beauties of the outdoors will be here forever."

By protecting the environment, we are protecting ourselves and future generations of Americans. Since its creation in 1970, the EPA's mission has been just that—to protect human health and the environment. The task is not an easy one, and the Agency cannot do it alone. All of us need to

educate ourselves about the environment and its needs in order for our nation to address the critical environmental issues that we face. I look forward to working with the Hispanic community and the EPA to address these issues which affect us all.

I would like to reiterate my appreciation to Administrator Jackson for inviting me to address this forum. I commend the EPA for actively reaching out to Hispanics as true partners in environmental protection through this Beyond Translation Initiative. Thank you. Muchas gracias.